

Using Movies for Teaching Low-Level Students of English

By Melanie Gilbert (China)

The advantages of using feature films (on video) for teaching high-level students are many. But can films be used constructively to teach low-level students? Until recently I thought the answer to this question must be no: a film is too long, and usually the dialogue is too quick and too difficult for elementary students to gain much from watching it. But recently I have experimented with using a film with low-level students, and I found it yielded unexpectedly rich results.

My students are pre-intermediate-or thereabouts-Chinese college teachers, and like many Chinese students they have great problems listening to and speaking English because of lack of exposure to the language. This was one reason why video seemed appropriate; another was that they had learned English through a very traditional, book-centred method, and video seemed a stimulating alternative. Also, I had brought my videos all the way from Britain and didn't want to waste them! I wanted to choose a film that had a fairly simple plot and a lot of visual information, to give them confidence even when the language seemed difficult. The film I chose was *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*, an American comedy about two men travelling (disastrously) across America to get home for Thanksgiving. The language in it is slangy and quick, but essentially what is being said isn't difficult to understand. I also felt that a bit of slang wouldn't do any harm to students whose spoken English is very formal. Here's how I approached it. The same techniques could be applied to many other films.

Comprehension Activities

I began by showing the opening sequence silently, so that instead of struggling to understand, the students could focus on visual clues to guess what was happening. At first they were puzzled as to why they weren't allowed to listen-after all, they were there to learn language-but when I explained the reason and told them they would hear the dialogue in due course, they accepted this approach. It led to a lot of animated discussion about what they could see, and it meant that by the time they did hear the dialogue they had a pretty good idea of what would be said, so they approached the listening with confidence. I used this approach on key scenes throughout the film, building up an outline of the plot.

Vocabulary Exercises

The film yielded rich opportunities for vocabulary-learning activities, and I avoided pre-teaching vocabulary where possible, preferring to use the film as an inspiration for vocabulary building. One approach was to ask the students to brainstorm a lexical set before watching. We had a fruitful lesson on "emotions" vocabulary: the students scribbled down all the "feelings" words

they could think of, and then watched a sequence of the film and ticked the words they thought applied-again, there was plenty of discussion and disagreement.

Another interesting area was “action” verbs: the students watched a scene and noted down all the things people did, asking for new words where they needed them. Thus a set of verbs such as cuddle, lose his/her temper, and steal emerged.

Dialogue

Several conversations during the film were clear enough (and short enough) to be dealt with word for word. In each case the students saw the sequence silently first and guessed the situation, or they listened and noted key words. They then received copies of the dialogue-or on one occasion I dictated it with paired students each writing down one character’s lines. The students could then reenact the dialogue and learn new vocabulary. We also did some productive work on stress and intonation. Other opportunities for freer roleplay should be self-evident.

Ongoing Activities

A number of ongoing activities were used to maintain comprehension and interest during the six weeks or so it took to work through the film. The students regularly recapped the story verbally and discussed the two main characters and their relationship. They also wrote short summaries of each section and handed these in, enabling me to ensure that they were all following the story (as well as providing useful writing and summarising practice). We also did a number of vocabulary review lessons outside the video room: miming actions to practise action verbs, using pictures to activate feelings words, and so on.

Cultural Information

Finally, for Chinese students who have never been outside China, the film was a mine of cultural information. This particular film gave us material for a lesson on Thanksgiving and how Americans celebrate it; it yielded useful information on food and hotels in America; and it also provided backup to work we had done separately on travel. For students who have never been to an airport or used a credit card, it is immensely useful to see what an American airport looks like and how the credit-card system operates.

Putting It Together

As a final conclusion to the lessons on this film we watched the whole thing without any particular task being set. For the students it was satisfying to see the pieces they knew fitting together, and the dialogues and vocabulary they had studied gave them helpful pegs on which to hang their understanding. Many of them repeated dialogues and key words aloud as they watched.

As a teacher, I found the lessons we did on this film a real eye-opener. There is no need for students to understand all, or even most, of the dialogue in a film in order to find rich rewards in terms of language learning; in fact, several of the activities we tried didn't involve listening to dialogue at all. The film was a kicking-off point for prediction, vocabulary, and roleplaying activities.

There are some films that would obviously be unsuitable for low-level students of English, and for the time being my video of Henry V is staying on the shelf. But films with a high visual content-slapstick comedy, action movies, or mystery stories-can be a rich and motivating source of language work for students with limited understanding of English.